OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

ANITA and THE SEVEN BOYS

BY ANNE WARNER

I MUST begin a little back—about seventeen or eighteen years back.

The missionaries came up the river first and built a chapel; then the fur-traders came next and built a shed for storing skins out of the rain until they could be carried eastward; then the soldiers came and built, first a block-house, and then a stone fort; then came the law and the steamboats; and then the settlers—the first townspeople.

They were young married people mainly, people whose lives and plans had been uprooted and whirled abroad by the war. There was quite a colony of them, men of all professions with pretty sweet-faced girl-wives, each seeking their fortune, as some one put it.

In January of the following year Anita came, and along through the twelfth month succeeding came the seven boys. Anita and the seven boys were the most important of all the new arrivals, for they were the first white children born in the young state.

Anita and the seven boys were of course intimate friends from the first minute of their respective advents. Their first teeth and their first steps were civic events, their last long clothes and their first short clothes were cherished heirlooms later on. When Anita's great-grandmother in Boston sent her the newest thing in velvet hoods the mothers of the seven boys all met in solemn conclave at the residence of Anita's mother and "took the pattern off" so that all the eight babies might be hooded alike. They were also strap-slippered alike, white embroidered-caped alike, baby cabbed alike, ivory-ringed alike and—in the second year—they all birthdayed alike one after another. It was all pretty and delightful—and somewhat pathetic, too, for it spoke very

plainly of the dreadful dirth of interest in life, when that life could find no wider center than the clothing and feeding of eight babies, whose intelligence was as yet in a very embryonic state of development.

But Time was soon to rectify all that. When Anita had two candles on her birthday cake she had already been entered in the census as one of the nine hundred citizens of her place of birth. When she had five candles she was one of three thousand. Then there was an enormous boom of western emigration and the little girl's twelfth birthday saw her living in a city—a city of paved streets, tall buildings, fine parks, and all other modern advantages. No one would have recognized the sites of the chapel, the shed for storing skins and the blockhouse; no one would have recognized the bluffs or the river; and no one would have recognized Anita and the seven boys.

Of course they had all grown. Twelve years has always produced tremendous changes in babies. John had grown so fast that his mother was very nervous over him, he being her only child. Eddy had grown mainly widthways; Tom and Dick were taller than Anita; Harry and Will were shorter than she was; Francis George (whose mother was a poet) was just her height.

But they still celebrated their birthdays together, Anita always leading off in January. And just as Anita's hood had set the fashion in hoods in days gone by, so now Anita's style of birthday celebration always set the style of all the other birthday celebrations for that year. When Anita testified to the number of her years by a circle of sugar cats instead of candles, Tom (whose fete came next) testified to his by a circle of sugar dogs, Eddy followed with sugar elephants, and so on for that year.

The next year Anita had the requisite number of big pink roses, and Tom followed with red roses, and so on to Francis George (whose mother always liked to produce a novel effect), who had towering spikes of hollyhocks.

Upon the following year Anita suddenly abandoned her cake and gave a dancing party with a German and the date and her age done in gold on the back of the programmes. Here was an innovation, but the other seven mothers rose nobly to the occasion—or occasions—and seven dancing parties each with a German and a programme attached, all took place in turn.

The next year Anita went away to boarding school and thus terminated all the happy series of events which had so prettily and pleasantly chained the lives of the eight together. Of course it was inevitable and of course it was sad, but que voulez-vous?

The seven boys stuck together more or less, went to school daily, shot snipe in twos and threes in the snipe season, played football (all but John, whose mother preferred that he shouldn't—he being her only child)), played tennis, played all sorts of things, and grew up assiduously.

When Anita came home the next summer she was a great surprise to her old comrades.

"Why, she's pretty!" Harry said to Will in most utter surprise.

"How awful old she seems," Eddy confessed to Dick, as they returned from having made an especially awkward call on the especially composed young lady.

"I don't like her as much as I did," Tom thought—but not aloud.

Francis George's mother had him lose no time in sending some flowers with his name and compliments neatly written out on the card attached.

Anita was very sweet and gracious—not to say condescending—to the boys. She talked pleasantly to them when they called, sought for topics of conversation not too abstruse for their limited intellects, and made lemonade for them whenever her mother reminded her to do so. Still, it was not a happy time, and there was no special wrenching of heart-strings when she returned to boarding-school. The sizing-up of the summer was terse and uncomplimentary.

"She's stuck up," Harry said to Will in great disgust, "she thought more of her clothes than she did of us."

"I wonder if she'll ever change back to like she used to be!" Tom meditated sadly; then remembered with a sudden rush of joy that they were going to have ducks for dinner—and ceased to consider the good or bad possibilities of Anita.

But the next summer was a greater surprise yet, for Anita didn't come home at all. Instead she went to visit a school-friend, and then abroad. Such doings! The boys really did not know whether they approved or not.

That January Anita was seventeen. They were all looking forward to being seventeen soon after and going to college the next year. It is pretty hard and absorbing work, that last year before college, with its exams and conditions (oh, poor Eddy!)—and very little brain power was spared for Anita and her affairs.

Still they were all glad when they heard that she was coming home the next summer, and when the day and hour of arrival came they went cheerfully to the station en bloc, just as they had always gone whenever she was to be welcomed back ever since they were babies together.

Such a lovely Anita as descended from the Pullman. Such a charming, dainty, bright, happy little figure!—not even a trace of the prim young lady who had froisséed them all so horribly two years before.

Instead she was all smiles—and even some sparkling tears, and as her feet touched the platform, she threw her arms around her father's neck (he was nearest, first, and dearest, naturally) and kissed him, and then—Wonder of Wonders!—she turned with a little laugh to Tom, who was next, and embraced and kissed him, and then she absolutely embraced and kissed them all.

The effect of this was very curious. First, they fell dead in love with her, and second, they suddenly dislike one another. They each rushed up to call that evening and, so as to be sure to be first in the field, they all went at seven instead of eight. Anita wasn't done dinner and they had to wait together in the drawing-room, suffering from a mutual dearth of remarks, and a tendency to stare at Francis George, who was wearing his first evening clothes for the first time.

But when Anita did come in she repaid them for all the agony, by being just too jolly and nice for words. She talked with them all, reminded them of loads of good times which they had forgotten, laughed over jokes which they finally became sufficiently unembarrassed to impart to her, and then when it was nearly ten o'clock and they had eaten seven pounds of French candy and had stuffed with lemonade and poundcake galore, she suddenly jumped up from her chair, ran across and squeezed herself in between Tom and Eddy on the sofa, and, taking a hand of each and looking about at the rest, said, half-earnestly and half-smilingly:

"And now I want to tell you all the secret; I want you to know before anybody else knows. I'm to be married next month and please promise to be my ushers."

At first they could hardly realize it. Tom bit his lip and Eddy sneezed. Francis George, whose poetic blood couldn't but show in some way, winked back tears, and Harry and Will, who had been coldly distant to one another ever since leaving the station four hours before, clasped hands involuntarily.

"I'm going to be married in the church," Anita continued, oblivious of the mortal blows she was dealing about her, "and I'm going to have five girls from school for my maids and three men and yourselves for my ushers. We're going to Japan, and perhaps all the way around the world afterwards."

There was a short pause, and then Eddy said, rather haltingly:

"Is he—is he a very old fellow?"

"No," said Anita, "he is thirty-two"; then she added, "Would you like to see his picture?"

"Well, I wouldn't mind," Eddy admitted, and she drew out from her belt what they had all supposed to be her watch, and showed them a handsome gold locket containing a miniature of a good-looking man with a heavy brown mustache. They looked at it one after the other and all resented the mustache and its thickness.

Then Francis George rose solemnly and said:

"Well, I must be going. I'll be very pleased to help you in any way I can."

"Oh, yes, we all will," they said.

"That will be so nice and dear of you," said Anita, rising as she spoke. The rest of the company rose at the same time.

"And I—I'm sure I congratulate you," said Francis George, mournfully trying to live up to the dignity of his costume.

"Yes, he—he looks like a real good sort," said Eddy.

"Thank you so much," said Anita.

She offered them more candy, but they refused firmly. The zest had been taken from their appetites. They could only bid their hostess and one another good-bye and depart. The wedding took place the next month and the boys took part and did their duty splendidly, although Tom had a splitting headache and Francis George nearly wept at the altar. The seven mothers sat in the pews just back of the families, and they shared the emotions of Francis George when they saw all the eight together before them. As for Anita's mother the tears just poured down her face throughout the ceremony, for Anita looked absolutely babyish in her white robe and she wept the more that it was now fully decided that, after Japan, they should go around the world.

Following the church ceremony there was a splendid wedding breakfast and a big reception and the boys did themselves no end of credit straight through, up to, and including the trying minute when they each threw one of their own old baby shoes after the bride.

Then ensued an interval of peace—and college—for they all entered the next autumn, even to Eddy, who had become quite thin with constant coaching.

At Christmas they heard from Anita, who hadn't gone around the world after all, her husband having decided in San Francisco that he hadn't even time to go to Japan. Grooms do give their brides such little surprises occasionally, and Anita had made up for hers by having her mother visit her, and exhibiting all her happiness to the latter's maternal appreciation. It is really to be doubted which Anita's mother enjoyed most, her visit or the coming home and telling about it. Anita's mother was one of the dearest and sweetest of women, but she could not forbear referring frequently in the company of her old friends to Anita's trials in a house with twelve servants, or to Anita's husband's set ways in never under any circumstances allowing certain of the horses to be driven by the second coachman.

"However, I tell Anita," said Anita's mother to Harry's mother, "that no man is perfect, and she must not mind little things like that."

The next summer the world turned absolutely upside down for the boys! When they returned home Anita was already there and—as Heaven is above!—she had a baby!

Now of course they all knew that babies were common, ordinary everyday things, but for Anita to have one!—Anita!

"Did you ever think of Anita with a baby?" Harry asked Will.

"Naw—she said she was going around the world," Will replied.

Then they straggled, somewhat sheepishly, up to call on Anita, and were shown the baby, a cunning little tot, with eyes tightly shut, and a dimpled fist in its mouth.

Anita put her hand gently on Tom's shoulder, when it was he who was contemplating the little creature, and said:

"Do you know it seems to me as if he belonged to the eight of us together. Don't forget to set him a good example always, will you dear, and remember, if lots of trouble ever comes to him or to me, I shall look to you to help us out. Remember."

Tom could not know that some of life's clouds had already begun to gather for his old playmate, but he did feel to put his own hand on hers and press it warmly, while a sharp stab struck him in a vital part and slew his boyhood then and there.

As the summer wore on the strangeness wore off and they all grew good friends with the baby, who in his turn learned to know them all, and reach out his arms to them all, and cry out with joy when they tossed him. Anita's husband did not appear; he was most frightfully rushed with business, and his wife and child stayed until late October before he had time to arrange for their return.

It was that winter that the terrible financial crash came. Fortunes were lost in an hour, homes ruined, men committed suicide under pressure equaling any in hell, and poor little Anita, just nineteen, came creeping back to her mother in March with a white face, a black dress and veil, no money, and her lovely, laughing baby.

By June the worst of the awful grief had been somewhat assimilated, and all the eight mothers were reunited, as they had not been in years, over the cradle that had once been Anita's. Eight great wells of maternal love and human kindness bubbled up around the poor little widowed girl and her child, and only one object seemed to animate them all—the object of lavishing all their best gifts upon the little one and his mother.

When the young men came home from college they found the new order of the day not only inaugurated and working well, but incumbent on every newcomer to adopt. Very cheerfully they adopted it and Anita's baby passed through his second summer without ever guessing that he was too poor to have a nursery maid.

Along toward September a curious phenomenon manifested itself. All the seven decided separately to quit college and go to work. For reasons best known to themselves, two years more of study seemed utterly impossible to contemplate. Never was such a unanimous desire to labor. Tom said nothing whatever to his family, but went to Denver on his own hook and started in railroading there. Harry studied bookkeeping nights. Francis George sent three poems to a magazine and was so artful as to inclose no address for fear that an address might betray his flights to his mother. Indeed they one and all threw out bait—more or less well-prepared—to independence.

The mothers were much agitated when this state of affairs became known, and John's mother said she feared his health was giving way, which was just what she had always expected—he being her only child. John's father was not without alarm at this idea, and so John was freed from his educational shackles and made assistant manager in one of his rich uncle's mills. Tom's parents never had been able to manage him, and as he was harder than ever to do anything with now that he was in Denver, they didn't try, and of course he didn't go back to college.

Francis George's mother wanted him to be a diplomat and his father wanted him to be a produce merchant (like himself), and goodness knows what they would have said to this sudden turn in his career had they known of it. But before Francis George thought prudent to enlighten them he fell ill with typhoid fever and that disposed of him for a while.

In the end four didn't go back and three did, and the winter passed smoothly along with all the mothers, except Francis George's (she had her hands full with Francis George and his typhoid fever), very much interested in the baby's progress, and in taking Anita out to drive, and in reminding one another of how like old times it all was.

But poor little Anita didn't appear able to join in any of the pleasant happenings, and as spring began to grow sunshiny she began to grow even paler and whiter than ever—and then almost before anyone had noticed, she began to cough.

There is something furtive and awful about a cough. It may mean nothing or it may mean such a lot. Anita's mother was frightened half to death, the family doctor suggested Colorado, and Tom's mother (from whom he inherited his strength of will) suddenly declared that she was going out to see her boy and that she was going to take Anita with her.

It seemed the only thing to be done.

The morning of the day before they left Harry came and took her to drive. During the drive he stuttered and stammered and finally succeeded in asking her if she thought—if she ever—if, in short—and so on.

Anita shook her head sadly. Harry said perhaps it was too soon and he should have waited. Anita said that that would never have made any difference. Then she wept and, with the finality of twenty years, told him that she was resolved never to marry again.

On the afternoon of the same day she went to say good-bye to Francis George, who was now convalescing. She found him awfully thin and very poetic. He suggested that as they both appeared doomed to an early death, they pass their remaining days together, but Anita refused this offer, too.

The next morning she wrenched herself away from her parents and child and started west with Tom's mother.

Now Tom's mother was a pleasant, practical lady who didn't believe that Anita had incipient consumption at all. They were not many miles on their route before she told her young friend so, and that very frankly. There are few things more cheering than to be assured that you haven't consumption after having been obliged to fear that you have. Anita began to feel better already. She kept on feeling better. Better and better and better. They reached Colorado and they reached Tom. His chief lent him a private car for a week and his mother and Anita went out in it and saw railway construction at first hand. Then they came back and traveled about a bit sight-seeing. Tom joined them when he could for Saturday and Sunday. His mother was radiantly happy; as for Anita, she began to get back her color.

They went back home for Christmas. The baby had grown, the boys were back from college, it was really a very happy time. Before it was over Will—who would have a fortune—asked Anita if she would share it, and she shook her head as before. She saw now that they were all going to ask her the same question and it made her very sad; but there was apparently no help for it.

They all did—all but Tom. Eddy asked her at Easter, and the other two when they first got home in June. Francis George asked for the second time in July and Harry asked her for the fourth time in August. Other men asked her, too. The truth was she was a dear, sweet little creature, and there was something about her pretty face under her crape bonnet which made all the world want her for his wife. I don't know what the acute charm of a widow's bonnet can be, but we all know how irresistible it is. Perhaps it is the knowledge that there walks another man's wife who is to be legitimately coveted.

Anyway, Anita grew more and more attractive and refused more and more good offers, until finally Tom came home. She had looked forward very eagerly to Tom's coming home, remembering their happy times in Colorado. But Tom came home quite changed. He was tanned, had a beard, and was in town two whole days before he came to her.

She was getting really hurt when he did come. And then when she knew that he was there she didn't want to go down to see him. It was very funny.

Then when she did go down there was no one but himself and herself in the room and he—well, he kissed her, and of course he shouldn't have done that. She had not kissed any of the boys since her wedding-day and never expected to kiss any of them again—not ever.

She blushed dreadfully, and she and Tom sat down on—well, on the sofa—and he took her hand. It was dreadful—but she let him—somehow.

And then he began to talk to her, and he talked to her a long time. And she let him.

And he held her hand all the time. And she let him.

And he told her that he loved her. And she let him.

And then he kissed her over and over. And she let him.

"I always meant to marry you sometime, Anita," he said; "it was so awful when you went and got married the way you did."

To this she made no reply.

"Of course we all were fond of you," Tom continued, "but none of the others ever thought of wanting to marry you, and I can tell you honestly that I have never once thought of wanting to marry anyone else."

"That's so nice to know," she said.

"And we'll be married very soon," he added, "and I'll carry you away with me when I go back."

And she let him.

And the other six kept each his secret, and Anita kept all their secrets. So that her one husband and their six wives never, never knew.

He held her hand all the time, and she let him.